

A
GUIDE
TO THE
BUILDING AND HISTORY
of
FALKNER SWAMP REFORMED CHURCH
of the
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST
in
NEW HANOVER TOWNSHIP
MONTGOMERY COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA

You have just entered a church.
Please respect it as a visible
sign of a worshipping congregation.

A GUIDE TO THE CHURCH BUILDING OF FALKNER SWAMP REFORMED CHURCH (U.C.C.)

During the earliest times the Reformed congregation at Falkner Swamp had no formal worship center. The people gathered in each other's homes and barns, or, weather permitting, in a field. Before the end of the Rev. John Philip Boehm's pastorate, however, a permanent structure was erected.

Little is known about that original wooden frame building. It seems to have been built during the 1740's, and replaced only in 1790 when the present brick building was constructed near the site of the frame church. It was the first wooden building which served as a hospital during the Battle of Pottsgrove (Revolutionary War). The parsonage, incidently, was used by General Anthony Wayne as headquarters during that same battle. We know that several soldiers who died while being treated in the church were buried in the church cemetery, but time has erased all signs of their graves.

The present building was designed by the master builder John Cunious*. It is 50 feet wide and 60 feet long. It had a three sided balcony, a wine-glass pulpit with sounding board, a free standing communion table (now placed in the vestibule and covered by many coats of paint from later generations), three entrances, clear glass windows (probably blown glass imported from England as were the bricks), a central chandelier which burned candles, and a seating capacity for about eight hundred people.

This structure served the congregation without alteration for 79 years. Then, in 1869, the interior was extensively modified, probably reflecting both changed circumstances in the congregation and new theological trends. The original pews and balconies were replaced. The result was a complete reorientation of the sanctuary. Where before the pulpit was against the northeast wall, it was placed against the southeast wall. The main doors originally opened into Swamp Pike; now the main door was on the northwest wall of the building (as at present). The large and handsome three-light "colonial" windows on the northwest and southeast walls (at balcony level) were walled up (the outline of the northwest wall window can be observed by facing the entrance and looking up at the disturbed bricks which surround the marble stone placed there.) The large chandelier was replaced by one which used kerosene instead of candles. Aside from the exterior changes already noted, a bell tower and steeple were added for the first time.

The only problem with these alterations were that they did not take into account the growing Sunday School movement. At first, the Sunday School met in a small school building on the northwest side of the church (now removed to make room for parking places). But by 1900 the Church School had outgrown the school. Also, the initial hostility of Pastors and Consistories toward the Sunday School had lessened. It was felt that the Sunday School should be incorporated into the total life of the congregation. Rather than construct an addition, however, the Consistory decided to again renovate the interior of the church building. This was done by removing the 1869 balconies and erecting in their stead a sloping floor at about the balcony level. The 1869 orientation was maintained; the pulpit was still against the southeast wall. With this modification, the sanctuary was "moved" upstairs. The Sunday school "took over" the main floor.

In general, this is the present arrangement. While minor renovations have been made both upstairs and downstairs since 1900, the floor plan is still as it was then. It should be noted in passing that the new Christian Education wing, added in 1963, is joined to the church building where a window once was on the northeast wall. In October of 1970, the Christian Education Building was re-dedicated and named "Wagner Hall" in memory of Herbert B. Wagner, who served as Superintendent of the Church School from 1903 to 1953.

*See bulletin board in vestibule for sketches of building.

Although we are learning much about how the building must once have looked, there is still a great deal to be discovered. We know very little about the original pew arrangement, or exactly how the balconies looked. Nor do we know where the stairs leading to the balconies were in 1790. With continued research it is hoped that we shall uncover more of these "mysteries" which surround our building. We are helped in our work of revealing the past because we still possess the original flooring (it can be seen in the large room below the present sanctuary). No doubt a thorough examination of the pillar foundations beneath this floor will give further clues to the precise placement of the original balconies.

While it would be desirable to someday restore the 1790 church to its original grandeur, we hope that this brief survey of the history of the building also gives you some feeling for a living congregation which has worshiped on this same site for more than two hundred years.

A BRIED HISTORY OF FALKNER SWAMP REFORMED CHURCH (U.C.C.)

In the early 18th century, German refugees of the Reformed faith from the Palatinate (the Rhine Valley, north of Switzerland) came to the New World and settled in this area, bringing with them their Bibles, hymn books, catechisms and an unbreakable faith in God. Because of persecution, oppression and famine in the Old World these German emigrants came to Pennsylvania to seek religious freedom.

At first they had no church edifice and worshipped in private homes and barns, Having no minister, they eventually hired a school teacher, John Philip Boehm, to be their layreader in 1720. Boehm was an enthusiastic, consecrated leader, and was soon urged to assume some of the offices of the ministry, even though unordained. He drew up a "Kirchenordnung", a form of church government, for the Falkner Swamp Reformed Congregation. In the same year, October 15, 1725, he distributed the elements of the Holy Communion for the first time to forty communicants at Falkner Swamp. At this time, Boehm also served the congregations at Skippack and White Marsh. The historical marker which stands along the road next to our church commemorates this great event with the words:

This Congregation is the oldest in continuous existence in the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Organized October 15, 1725, by the Rev. John Philip Boehm, founder of the German Reformed Church in Pennsylvania.

In 1727 the ministerial acts of Mr. Boehm were challenged by the Rev. George Michael Weiss, the first regularly ordained German Reformed minister in Pennsylvania. Upon petition from his three churches, the Reformed Church of Holland accepted Boehm's Form of Church Government, approved his ministerial acts, and paved the way for his ordination in New York, thus Boehm was ordained in that city on November 23, 1729.

During the twenty-three year ministry, Boehm founded at least twelve congregations and served many others. He died in 1749 while still serving some of his churches. "The Father of the German Reformed Church in America" was buried under the altar of Boehm's Reformed Church in Blue Bell, Pa. Before his death, Boehm spoke very affectionately of the Swamp Congregation:

This is my beloved congregation, confided to my care for more than twenty-three years; but now by reason of the rapidly approaching infirmities of age, which as I dare not much longer venture to make long journeys, I gladly and willingly, for the congregation's best interest, hand over to Dominie Leydich.

It is interesting to note that the name of this congregation was derived from Daniel Falkner who was an attorney of the Frankfort Company of London appointed to sell the 22,377 acres of land extending from the Schuylkill to Pennsburg. This land purchased by the German settlers was bottom land or meadow (the German word is "Schwamm"). So it was not long before this section of the country became known far and wide as Falkner Swamp.

The second minister of the congregation, John Philip Leydich, was sent to America by the Synod of Holland in the year 1748. He served faithfully for seventeen years, confirming the first class of young men and women in this congregation in 1749, and was elected President of the Coetus of Pennsylvania in 1760.

During the pastorate of Nicholas Pomp (1765-1783), the congregation weathered the hardships of the Revolutionary War. The Church served as a hospital for the wounded soldiers; our parsonage served as the headquarters for General Anthony Wayne while Washington's army encamped in Pottsgrove. Later John F. Hartranft, a noted Union general in the Civil War, and afterwards Governor of Pennsylvania, was born in this same house.

Under the leadership of the Rev. Frederick Dallicker (1784-1799), the present Church building was erected. We would like to think that the congregation had a log church before 1739. However, according to records, the first building which Boehm called a church was a well-built frame structure erected sometime between 1739 and 1743. Then in 1790 a new brick church, 50x60 feet, was built by the congregation, numbering around 250 members. The new church at that time had galleries on three sides, a wine-glass pulpit with sounding board, three entrances, and a seating capacity of about 800. It was substantially built; to this we can attest today. It was one of the handsomest churches at the time for many miles around. The master builder was John Cunious. The congregation, we are told, had a severe struggle to raise the necessary funds to pay for the new building.

This brick church was remodeled in 1869 under the pastorate of the Rev. Lucian J. Mayer, again in 1900 during the pastorate of the Rev. George W. Roth, and again in 1953 during the pastorate of the Rev. William H. Solly.

In the first quarter of the 19th century (1800-1832), the Rev. Lebrecht Frederick Herman labored as pastor and teacher. He conducted in the parsonage a school for the training of ministerial candidates, which became known as "The Swamp College." Thirteen young men, five being his own sons, were trained by him in the first "theological seminary." With the assistance of his students and sons he served at least nine congregations.

The congregation had numerous high points and low points in her history during the 1800's and early 1900's. The church suffered when Rev. Herman persuaded the congregation to withdraw from Synod in 1821 and organize the "Free Synod of Pennsylvania." The same thing happened again under the Rev. Andrew Hofmann in 1853. The Rev. Robert A. Van Court was the main cause of a stormy pastorate from 1859 to 1866 because he was more interested in the tobacco business than ministering to his people. Likewise, the congregation's reluctance to organize a Sunday School and to change from German to English Services of Worship stunted her potential growth. The congregation did survive these "low periods" because of good leadership from men like the Rev. Lucian J. Mayer (1866-1887) and others. It is noteworthy that in 1842 the Rev. Benjamin Schneider, a son of this congregation became the first Reformed missionary to go abroad, serving in Turkey under the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions.

In 1891 the Goshenhoppen Classes united St. Paul's Church, Amityville, and Falkner Swamp into the Swamp-Amity Charge. Two years later, Trinity Church, Bechtelsville, was added. Rev. Roth was called as the first pastor of this new charge.

This relationship continued until 1959 when the Swamp-Amity charge was dissolved under the guidance of the Rev. William H. Solly. The Rev. William Solly became the pastor at Amity Church and Falkner Swamp called the Rev. Dennis W. Haas as their pastor. During Mr. Haas' pastorate the congregation increased in size and constructed a Christian Education addition to its physical plant (1963). In 1965 Pastor Haas resigned to seek a college chaplaincy position after six fruitful years of work among the congregation. The next pastor was the Rev. J. Robert Achtermann called in 1965. He returned to teaching in 1969 and presently serves a congregation in Millersville. The Rev. Peter S. Shults followed him and served the congregation from 1970 to 1974. The present pastor is the Rev. Gary C. Hauze called in September of 1974.

During the year 1975, Falkner Swamp will observe the 250th Anniversary of the First Communion of the German Reformed people in the United States. Throughout the year guest speakers and special events will highlight the festivities, focused in the month of October. All persons interested in becoming a part of the celebration are invited to attend these special services as we worship and glorify God.

At the conclusion of his history, (1904) The Rev. George W. Roth wrote these words:

All the good that has been accomplished by the pastors and members of this congregation during the past cannot be recorded here. That is the work of the recording angel of heaven. Even out of their failings we believe that God has wrought good, and will continue to do so. We and our deeds are passing into history. What place shall we occupy? Shall God, in His providence, use us as a scourge to drive others into line, or will we profit by the example of those who have gone before us?

We believe that we are learning from our history. We pray that the present congregation may write a worthy page in the history unfolding in our midst.

PASTORS OF FALKNER SWAMP REFORMED CHURCH

John Philip Boehm	1720-1748
John Philip Leydich	1748-1765
Nicholas Pomp	1765-1783
Frederick Dallicker	1784-1799
Lebrecht Frederick Herman	1800-1832
Andrew Hofmann.	1833-1858
Robert A. Van Court	1859-1866
Lucian John Mayer	1866-1887
Joseph D. Peters.	1888-1889
Gideon F. Fisher.	1889-1891
George W. Roth.	1892-1915
Harvey J. Miller.	1915-1920
John F. Frantz.	1920-1924
Howard A. Althouse.	1924-1945
William H. Solly.	1946-1959
Dennis W. Haas.	1959-1965
J. Robert Achtermann.	1965-1969
Peter S. Shults	1970-1974
Gary C. Hauze	1974-